

Murphy signs measure encouraging F-35s at ACY

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Gov. Phil Murphy on Thursday signed a measure encouraging the U.S. Air Force to base some of its new-generation F-35 fighter jets at the 177th Fighter Wing of the New Jersey Air National Guard at Atlantic City International Airport.

“The 177th Fighter Wing has the strength, expertise and resources to house the F-35 fighter jets,” said sponsoring Assemblyman John Armato, D-Atlantic. “The facilities have already been designed to accommodate the jets, and the 177th has vast experience in homeland defense and air-to-ground missions.”

Situated between New York City and Washington, D.C., the 177th is an “ideal location for the Air Force to keep these jets,” said co-sponsor Assemblyman Vince Mazzeo, D-Atlantic.

The measure previously passed the Assembly in November by a vote of 73-0-1, and was approved 40-0 by the Senate in December 2018.

The F-35 is the latest fifth-generation fighter, made to replace the military’s aging fleet of F-16 Fighting Falcons and A-10 Thunderbolt IIs, according to the Air Force. The F-16s are based at the 177th.

The one-seat F-35 provides greater protection through stealth features and a sensor package that gives the pilot more information than any fighter in history, according to the military.

In October, the Pentagon announced a \$34 billion contract with Lockheed Martin for the delivery of 478 F-35s.

Just a month earlier, in mid-September, the first two of 20 F-35s arrived at the Vermont Air National Guard base in South Burlington. It was the first National Guard unit to get the latest fighters, in a 2016 decision.

Dannelly Field Air Guard Station in Alabama and Truax Air Guard Station in Wisconsin were chosen to get the jets in a 2018 decision.

“We have kids maintaining planes 20 years older than them,” said Col. Brian Cooper, head of the aircraft maintenance squadron at the 177th, during a tour of the facility for U.S. Rep. Jeff Van Drew in August.

Van Drew, R-2nd, who has been advocating for basing the newer jets at the 177th, has said there is one technical issue that concerns some about putting the F-35s in Atlantic City: They take longer to prepare for takeoff, and it’s important that the 177th can scramble into the air quickly to respond to threats around New York City and the nation’s capital.

“The goal and job of our 177th is to monitor and take care of the Washington, D.C., to New York City corridor, so it needs to be fast,” Van Drew said.

Van Drew has said he is working with 177th Commander Col. Brad Everman on the issue.